

Honoring Our Shared Vision / San Juan County Future Scenario

Presentation by Joe Symons, January 2021

Overview:

San Juan County Washington pivoted from a resource based economy to tourism and 2nd home construction beginning in the 1970's, when it became the fastest growing county in the state.

For decades, County Council has actively chosen to avoid conversation as well as action regarding the growth potential of the county (as defined by the land use density map); see newspaper article from 1977 below. The buildout population of the county, as defined by the density map, is many multiples of the current population. To be specific, using county Tax Parcel Data as compiled by DCD (Department of Community Development) presented as the county's GDLI (Gross Developmental Development Inventory), the buildout population, defined as the population of the county if every parcel were subdivided to its density designation and had a residential structure, would be just over 130,000 people (see "Buildout Population Forecast" reference below). This number *does not include visitors*. The current population of the county (based on [US Census data for 2020](#)) is just over 17,582.

There is no restriction on the number or location of building permits issued by the county. There is no information on the county's carrying capacity. There is a substantial inconsistency between the official Vision Statement for the county and the buildout potential baked in to the current density map. None of these topics has benefitted from public exposure and conversation.

A "docket request" has been made to ask the county to validate these numbers. DCD has once again denied this request, as has the Planning Commission (PC) and the County Council (CC).

Current Status:

(12 October 2021)

Background:

The Planning Commission (PC) held a public hearing on 16 July 2021 to continue the discussion of docket request 21-0003, following the 18 June 2021 PC hearing which originally brought up docket requests for PC's review and decision as to whether to recommend the various dockets for approval to the County Council.

You can find a copy of the staff report for this hearing here:

<https://www.sanjuanco.com/DocumentCenter/View/22943/2021-Docket-Initial-Briefing-Staff-Report---May-6-2021?bidId=>

The PC voted 7-2 against recommending that the docket request for a truth in planning statement be added to the DCD work order. The next step was a [County Council hearing on 28 September 2021](#),

which made the ultimate decision about this request for honesty in SJC's future. CC chose to deny putting this request on DCD's work list. (You can hear my testimony at 1:48:47 thru 1:52:47 and watch the discussion beginning at 2:03:36 thru 2:25:00). Council's argument for not even calculating the buildout number re this 'truth in planning' request was that if the County "knew" what the buildout population was, they would have to do something about it.

Over [140 letters were submitted by residents](#) in support of Docket 21-0003.

Is this for real?

Could the buildout population really be around 130,000?

Here is an excerpt from an email from Cindy Wolf (Council member from District 2, Orcas and Waldron) received on 10 May 2021:

"Erika explained this to me and that there were few remedies short of vacating the platt and potentially bankrupting the county with lawsuits. Everyone believes you because you are correct. No one seems to know what to do about it. My head is still swimming from figuring this out three weeks ago."

Notwithstanding Councilperson Wolf's comment above, Councilperson Wolf voted against advancing the docket request to DCD's work orders.

The presentation outline and references are provided below.

A zoom recording of the presentation is at doebay.net/bigpicture.mp4

Short on time?

A transcript of the presentation is at doebay.net/bigpicturepresentationtranscript.pdf

Action Steps:

Take a breath. There is a lot of information. It might seem overwhelming and you might just want to bag it. Please don't. What's on the table is your future experience of living and working in San Juan County.

Watch or read the transcript of the presentation;

Write a letter to the County Council (council@sanjuanco.com);

How to Comment:

- PC hearings are on the 3rd Friday of each month.

- Written comments submitted prior to 12:00 p.m. on the date before the PC hearing will be forwarded to the Planning Commission members and published online at <https://www.sanjuanco.com/1658/Annual-Docket>. Please email any written comments to sophiac@sanjuanco.com.
- To provide public testimony at the public hearing, join the Microsoft Teams meeting; contact Lynda (see below) for access to Teams, which is spelled out in the published PC agenda. Staff will provide a short briefing, the Planning Commission will hear public testimony, and then they will deliberate and make their official recommendation to the Council.
- PC video recordings of hearings are available at: <https://www.sanjuanco.com/971/Planning-Commission-Meeting-Video>
- Please write them; even one sentence will matter! contact information below. **According to a PC member, calling in to state your views is much more effective**

Read the [letter I wrote to the Planning Commission](#) if you would like ideas. Your letter can be short: speak to your feelings about the qualities of life that you want preserved;

Outline and References:

Background:

How I got involved in comprehensive planning in San Juan County (SJC)
 Brief review of Comprehensive Plan (CP) evolution 1992-1999
 Litigation 1999-2007
 Result: basic issues ignored

Context:

SCOTUS affirms that Land Use decisions are exclusively the purview of counties: not the feds, nor the states, nor cities.

The Comp Plan is the legal foundation for all land use activities in SJC.

Census from 1870-1970: Less than 4000 county population during that 100 year time period
 Current population is greater than 4x the 1970 population (~16k)
 Uncontested [1999 brief](#) showing buildout population based on 1979 density map at 175,000.
 There are no restrictions on the number of building permits issued per year. There are no restrictions on the number of vacation rental permits issued per year. SJC does not illuminate these realities; they have to be inferred by the lack of any regulations restricting the issuance of permits.
 Regardless of the intent of the Vision statement and the CP, SJC's future is not determined by the vision or the CP. It is determined by the market. The CP is effectively toothless. SJC has minimal to non-existent enforcement.

EDITORIALS

★ Opinions *~* Letters ★

The Future Density

At the plan hearing in Friday Harbor both Dick Franck and Jack Powell, co-owners of the Wooden Shoe Farm, protested the forty-acre density restriction on their property. Dick Willard, owners of the Blazing Tree Ranch, also protested the plan restrictions, and implied he would sue. Many others in Friday Harbor and on Orcas and Lopez similarly objected very strongly to the density restrictions.

Yet the proposed forty-acre density on the Wooden Shoe would result in something over a twelve-fold increase in density. The proposed ten-acre density on most of the Blazing Tree would result in a seventy-fold increase in density. The five-acre density asked for by Franck and Powell would be a hundred-fold increase in density.

A twelve-fold density increase on all land in the county would provide for 78,000 people, if the current population is used as a base. Summer population would be in addition to this.

A fifty, seventy, or hundred-fold increase in population is all but incomprehensible. That probably is not what Franck, Willard, and the others had in mind, except for their own property.

But the plan, restrictive as it is considered, does provide for a very substantial increase in population. Just how many it does provide for, in addition to the existing divided parcels, is not stated. No one has asked that question, but it should be asked.....and answered!

Any plan, and particularly this plan, should have some specified objectives. Population is one we can all understand.

The projected population under the comprehensive plan could be spelled out in fairly concrete — or rather “flesh and blood” — terms. Nearly everyone can relate to that in terms of people in ferry lines, people drawing water from the ground, and perhaps a twelve, fifty, or hundred fold increase in the size of the garbage dumps.

It would be the work of not more than a day or two with a scale to compute the area of each density zone and calculate the potential population, then add them up to get the potential population island by island, and for the county.

In the case of those areas designated “base” this could not be done since density in those areas is, for all practical purposes, unlimited. Perhaps “unlimited development district” would be a more appropriate term than “base.”

The figure could be further refined, at the expense of some additional time, to include the already developed parcels within each zone which are “grandfathered” in. The existing potential population then could be added to the “planned” potential population to give us the maximum the plan provides for.

This would doubtless be a startling figure indeed.

It would put the plan in perspective. In fact, it is difficult to see how any further evaluation of the plan can take place at all without this figure. It is the only way we can evaluate the limitations owners are being asked to accept against the problems of the future population.

Relevant Documents

[Overview of Land Use Planning in SJC](#) This background information is not available anywhere including the SJC website.

[Cost of Community Services \(COCS\)](#)

Very short version: more people, higher taxes. For every dollar of tax revenue from new residential construction, it costs SJC \$1.32 to provide services to that new structure.

“[Nantucket Study](#)” / Study of Socioeconomic Impacts of Growth Pressure in Selected Seasonal/Resort Communities. Very short version: SJC is on precisely the same evolutionary pathway as elite resort communities everywhere in the U.S. Note that while SJC paid for this study, it is neither mentioned nor linked anywhere on the SJC web site.

The editorial here, written in August 1977, speaks to the awareness that having a buildout number based on the proposed density map being crafted for the first SJC Comprehensive Plan is essential. As you know, SJC did not and has not

run the numbers then, or ever, including up to today.

Buildout Population Forecast:

Gross Developmental Land Inventory (GDLI), [summary of information](#). This spreadsheet summarizes the buildout potential in SJC by GDLI categories. The spreadsheet is information dense / all sources are cited.

[Docket Request](#) to SJC Planning Commission (PC) in 2001 requesting a “truth in planning” document outlining the buildout population and impacts. [PC unanimously approved](#) the docket request; CC ignored it. Similar docket requests were filed in 2018 and [2019](#): in both cases the Department of Community Development (DCD), PC and CC ignored the request.

Here is my 2021 Docket submission, modified from earlier versions to introduce the legal background supporting the request:

<http://doebay.net/sunshine/Docketsubmission2021.pdf>

You can read my [letter to CC](#) submitted a few days before the 28 Sept 2021 public hearing. The letter includes references to the GDLI data should you be interested in running the numbers for yourself.

The links below present the original and revised Vision Statements for the CP. The Vision Statement is listed as the “north star” of the plan; the CP states that the entire plan is built to fulfill the Vision Statement. (GMA states that the vision statement is a necessary and legally relevant component of the CP.)

[1994 SJC Vision Statement](#)

[2018 SJC Vision Statement](#)

[The Path Not Taken](#) is a book of essays that discuss big picture issues regarding the choices we face. Recommended essay: We buy our Future. (readers are encouraged to read all essays to learn about the complexity of the topic)

[KeepSanJuansWild.org](#) lays out big picture issues and many take action steps.

Challenges to be overcome:

Illusion of independence / replace with reality of interdependence

Humans are not separate from and superior to all other life forms

Humans represent the zenith of the apex predator / we are an invasive species

Illusion of representative government / accountability not required

Most recent example in SJC: refusal of Council to take any effective and appropriate action regarding the impact of vacation rental permits and hospitality impacts in general, despite overwhelming and unprecedented public outcry.

Washington’s Growth Management Act (GMA) does not require counties to consider the impact of visitors.

Lack of leadership among CC and relevant non-profits (FOSJ, SJPT)

Invisibility of these realities. Lack of transparency and proactive engagement.

Assumption of “normality” / Don’t rock the boat. Me trumps We.

Talk is easy. Walk is hard.

Solutions:

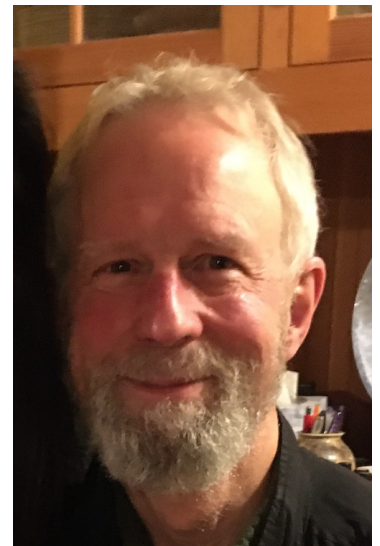
Hold elected officials accountable / hammer the nail until it goes in / fatal assumption is presuming that electing new council members will not require constant review, supervision, pressure;

Develop continuous opportunities for thorough public conversation about where we are going and how we are going to get there;

Demand full, honest, transparent, thorough information about what is the current maximum development potential and the expected impacts of that developmental pressure;

Demand that the Vision Statement be operationalized: that the general language serve as definable and enforceable guardrails that transparently percolate downward through the goals and policies of the comp plan and specifically to the UDC. All comp plan rules, policies, regulations, etc. should explicitly document how they point upward to the preceding/overlying component of the Vision Statement;

Explicitly map out the pros and cons of future scenarios, recognizing that there are major tradeoffs. Erase any illusions that we can have our cake and eat it too. Things will cost more no matter what. Costs are not just economic; economic costs are inaccurately low as they do not include externalities. The big question is: will we choose to pay for what we want or will we default to pay for what we don’t want.



Joe Symons, 2021

Distribution:

This document is available online to pass to others who may be interested in this topic. The document is at

doebay.net/bigpicture.pdf

(John Lewis)

JL: I wanted to do what I could to make things better, 'cause when you see something that is not right or fair or just, you have to say something. You have to do something. It's like a fire burning up in your bones, and you cannot be silenced.

from:

<https://www.ted.com/talks/>

[john_lewis_and_bryan_stevenson_the_fight_for_civil_rights_and_freedom/transcript](https://www.ted.com/talks/john_lewis_and_bryan_stevenson_the_fight_for_civil_rights_and_freedom/transcript)